

## Conference Paper

# Communication Design of Indian Matrimonial Advertisements in the *Sunday Times of India*

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## Abstract

The study addresses graphic and verbal elements as part of the communication design of matrimonial advertising. Following European trends and rules of the press, the *Sunday Times of India* newspaper preserves the traditional features in its design for the matrimonial column. It is argued that its communication design is a mixture of two design styles: universal (easily interpreted by the wide audience) and specifically Indian. This is not a problem, since matrimonial advertisements are addressed only to in-group members. For them, the use of ethnic motives in the verbal and non-verbal components of matrimonial advertising is more appealing. Through the signs of the semiotic matrimonial code, they enter the general space of cultural communication. This evokes their trust to the verbal content, creates a comfortable atmosphere for dealing with such a delicate topic and increases the chances of successful engagement. The pragmatic significance of graphic design elements prevails over text ones. All graphic elements, ornaments, lines, linings, vignettes, frames, etc., serve to create a respectful image of the person placing the advertisement, the person on whose behalf the advertisement is placed, and the potential bride/groom. Respect and traditions are key elements of Indian culture and are reflected in the space of newspaper communication. Understanding the requirements for the publication of matrimonial advertisements reflects the social structure and the specifics of interpersonal relations between men and women, parents and children. The interpretation of both visual and verbal signs by outsiders is largely dependent on his/her experience of Indian culture.

**Keywords:** communication design, matrimonial advertisements, Indian culture, graphic and verbal design elements

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Received: 13 January 2020

Accepted: 22 January 2020

Published: 30 January 2020

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 4th CTPE 2019 Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

Communication design is the design of things that express information, data, emotions, culture and aesthetics. This is a social process that is embedded in the culture [1]. Possessing an array of basic and auxiliary graphic means, designers strive to create a special communication space that appeals to the audience for a specific purpose.

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In the global communication space, designers use standard graphic elements; in the national context, there are still signs indicating individual cultural characteristics containing information about cultural or national identity and causing a specific emotional response [2], [3].

The perception of the national communication space is often hampered by the presence of culturally defined signs that require knowledge of the national cultural code both at the verbal and non-verbal levels for its decoding.

Using M. Lotman's terminology, it can be argued that the national media and communication space "unfolds before us not as an implementation of a message in any single language, but as a complex device that stores diverse codes, transforms received messages and generates new ones... The process of deciphering text is extremely complicated..." [4].

In our case, we address the issue of how the design of communication is employed in the matrimonial rubric of the printed version of the Indian newspaper *Sunday Times of India* in order to create a social space for presenting brides- and grooms-to-be.

Elements of communication design, reflecting the cultural specifics of the national media space in general and Indian in particular, remain under-studied. In the scientific literature, there is no data on the features of the communication design of Indian matrimonial announcements.

## 2. Research Material

We examined 1,500 classified advertisements published in the *Sunday Times of India* in January 2018 in terms of their special communication space in terms of verbal and visual cultural representations. This space is considered as part of the unique Indian social space for building effective communication relations, the purpose of which is to create a new family as the basis of society.

Features of the content of matrimonial advertising have been studied previously. In most cases, authors turn to genre [5], semantic and stylistic analysis; identify specific national and cultural characteristics at the level of gender stereotypes and frame models [6], conduct a cross-cultural analysis of communication strategies [7], [8] and self-presentation [9]. Changes in matrimonial announcements in the Indian press caused by greater social freedom coming from the West are considered in [10], [11], [12], [13].

The qualitative characteristics of the Indian bride or groom, found in newspapers in the south and north of the country, are analyzed in [14], and matrimonial advertisements as a reflection of personal characteristics are tackled in [15]. The images of women in

such types of advertising (for example, the color of their skin) and gender stereotypes in the perception of men and women in Indian society are elicited in [13].

F. Dei [16] reconstructed the history of the established practice of producing matrimonial advertisements in the Indian press. A historical analysis of Indian classified matrimonial advertisements is presented in Majumdar [17] and Seth and Patnayakuni [12]. At the end of the 19th century, under the influence of British and Western European cultural traditions, the growing circulation of newspapers in Indian cities resulted in the displacement of the traditional matchmaker (*ghataka*) due to the matrimonial column.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study began in India, when one of the authors underwent a four-month internship at the APTECH Institute in New Delhi within the framework of the *Intercultural Communication and Graphic Design* Program

First, the material was collected. Then, through inclusion in the academic community, the author interacted with local residents to identify the role of matrimonial advertisements in Indian society. The author interviewed local residents (including graphic design specialists) to clarify, reveal, and explain symbols, images, words and concepts that reflect the historical memory of Indian society.

Classified matrimonial advertisements attracted our attention due to their graphic and verbal presentation. Unlike modern print media in Western countries, Indian newspapers retain their traditional graphic elements and language.

The semiotic approach was used to evaluate each matrimonial advertisement as a single communicative space. Text and graphic elements were seen as signs of the Indian matrimonial code.

### 4. Research Description

The study was carried out in several stages.

At the first stage of the study, we identified general features of the newspaper in question. *The Times of India* is the second oldest newspaper in India, first published in 1838. Citing Chizhikov, "its language of communication fulfills the mission of the socio-cultural integrator of social interaction" [18] reflecting various social issues: environmental pollution, gender asymmetry, social stratification, low literacy, high criminal rate, discrimination against women, etc. These are directly or indirectly related to the

common global problems of overpopulation and traditional cultural values. In terms of its design, the following features exist:

1) Lack of division into theme headings: announcements of missing persons, cases of abduction (most often these are children and young girls) are placed next to announcements about someone's birthdays or college admission.

2) Publication of images of deceased people for identification purposes. Non-retouched photographs of the faces of the dead let immediately notify millions of people, which could be a problem in overpopulated India. It also demonstrates their more trivial perception of life and death. In our country, this is considered unethical, according to the Civil Code of the Russian Federation, Ch. 8. Art. 152.1 [19].

3) Presence of a separate space for obituaries (most often at the bottom of the page). These may include expressions of condolences in memory of people who left 10 and 20 years ago next to fresh obituaries for someone in the neighborhood.

4) Use of a significant number of symbolic images. For instance, the swastika, which appeared in the 8th century BC from a diamond-shaped ornament, symbolizes greeting, prosperity and good luck. This sign can often be seen on rickshaws and cars. The traditional headings on air pollution depict the Lotus Temple appearing through a veil of black dots symbolizing smog from burning garbage. This graphic illustration stands for one of the symbols of spiritual purity in New Delhi and is used to attract more attention to the issue.

5) Use of oriental design in auxiliary graphic means: ornaments in the spaces between columns and headings, vignettes, colorful liners in the Kalamkari style, which are opposed to the conventions of the geometric style. Historically, this is similar to the process of transforming a line into a vignette surrounding a single meaningful communication space - in this case, the modular space of classified advertisements. While many Western publications are dominated by either a geometric linear ornament or generally graphic and text elements on the page are separated by empty space, the use of oriental elements is still present in the Indian tradition of print design. Traditional Indian ornaments decorate fabrics, home interiors, ceramics, and even human bodies. In addition, they are very significant for the media.

6) Last but not least, the presence of a matrimonial heading in accordance with Indian ethnic traditions.

The second stage of the study was devoted to the study of the specifics of the design of the newspaper's page, which contains matrimonial announcements. We focused on how their graphic representation fits into the space of the entire newspaper page (ideally, the entire issue).

The third stage was devoted to the layout and content of individual advertising (1,500 items). We also examined a website where one can apply for the publication of a matrimonial advertisement in print or on CD. The cost of an advertisement depends on the space it occupies (at least 5 lines), distribution area (maximum in 37 cities), the presence of graphic elements (font style, larger font size, ornaments, colors, liners, accompanying illustrations, etc.).

## 5. Results and Discussion

The fact that in many countries of the world people tend to use online resources for dating advertisements (dating sites, special applications, etc.) makes such items in the printed version of the national Indian newspaper even more unique. Their particular communication space possesses specific textual and visual characteristics. Their effective functional communication design promotes a certain kind of cultural practice: parents selecting brides and grooms and thus forming a new family.

According to the information received, it can be argued that the practice of publishing matrimonial advertisements in print media, on the one hand, reflects the traditional (more than a century-old) rubric in the Indian periodicals. On the other hand, it follows European printing trends and rules which led to a mixture of two design styles. Some of the ethnically Indian elements can be easily misunderstood by outgroup readers on the thematic and lexical levels [20].

By analyzing the design of the *Soulmate* column, we find that the breakdown is a reflection of a modular, systematic approach to the layout. Matrimonial advertising is developed according to a template, the effectiveness of which depends on the relevant individual elements.

The design of any publication is based on the needs of readers and the publication strategy to meet this need, that is, the style of publication is connected and compatible with the characteristics of the audience. In the readers' ads section, the modular layout interferes with the manifestation of the applicant's individual styles.

However, individual style is still manifested in the arrangement of materials on the page. A selection and sequence of announcements are given according to the Indian cultural traditions. Thus, a hierarchical compositional division into graphically allocated blocks is created:

- 1) The first and most important principle is search of the bride or groom taking into account their caste affiliation (castes are presented alphabetically):

Each caste (varna) lives in accordance with its dharma - with that set of traditional religious precepts and prohibitions, the creation of which is attributed to the gods, divine revelation. Dharma determines the norms of behavior of the members of each caste, regulates their actions and even feelings they are allowed. Indians are brought up with the knowledge of their absolute guiding virtue.

- Agarwal (The caste of merchants in North India. Many members of this caste profess Jainism -- one of the oldest religions. The philosophy and practice of Jainism are primarily based on the soul self-improvement to achieve omniscience, omnipotence and eternal bliss. There are requirements regarding their way of life, possible professions and relationship partners).

- Brahmins (the highest caste in India).

- Kshatriyas (Warriors, soldiers. In rural areas, they include landowners, possibly associated with former ruling houses, such as Rajput princes in North India). Their traditional occupations are estate managers and various administrative positions including the army. Nowadays, these castes no longer exercise their previous power and authority).

The untouchables -- Dalits -- are never published in this rubric.

2) The second publication rule is mentioning belongingness to a community. The term 'community' is sometimes used as a synonym for caste, however its semantic content is more complicated: it can mean belonging to a particular profession, religion together with a caste.

3) Professions are always stated. Most often Indian parents are looking for health workers, engineers, bank employees, and specialists holding an MBA degree.

4) Religions are also indicated (Christian, Muslim, Hinduism).

5) Another principle is placing advertisements of the more open-minded Indians or those with special circumstances with a 'caste no bar' sign. It means that the caste does not matter for the applicant. This can happen due to the applicants' general more progressive attitude to marriage, their previous divorce, having children. A peculiar status in this rubric is being a Manglik. It refers to people born under the special influence of Mars. Marriage with Mangliks is believed to bring misfortune. The Hindu concept of a Manglik child has a very negative connotation: the one born at the wrong time and under the wrong planet doomed to be unhappy, a bad spouse, and a destroyer of the family.

2) Often the preferred languages of the bride or groom-to-be are stated (e.g. Bengali, Punjabi).

3) The wanted nationality, presence of the green card are published as well.

Describing the whole complex of the graphic elements on the page, we shall dwell on the header in more detail.

The header is the most stable element of the page, its identifier, due to which the audience recognizes the section. In the *Sunday Times of India*, matrimonial announcements are placed on the page headed *Times Soulmate*. The letter 'O' is substituted with concatenated signs -- the gender symbols that became prominent in the European tradition since K. Linnaeus -- the astronomical signs of Mars (blue) and Venus (in this case red). The signs have been mythologized and are now interpreted as masculine and feminine.

According to V.V. Tulupov, "if one tries to mentally split the process of semantic perception of visual information into stages, it can be assumed that the main header will be a semantic stimulus for the reader, and the graphic elements that make up one complex with the header (head piece symbols, photographs) will be visual incentives. Moreover, the latter precedes the semantic stimulus, and together they facilitate the whole process of perception" [21].

Thus, the intertwined, interlocking signs act as a visual stimulus symbolizing strong unbreakable ties between the husband and wife, and soulmates. The semantic stimulus is the text printed in large black font in the very center of the top of the page.

The color associations established in the newspaper are understood by representatives of different cultures. The binary color opposition of pink and blue represents gender colors: blue for males and pink for females. On the pages under consideration, the opposition of the colors is different -- red and blue.

To separate the bride and groom search ads, this publication uses this color opposition, which has a deeper meaning for the Indian nation than just boy-girl colors. All shades of red are traditional colors of Indian brides and grooms. Red is believed to be the amulet color protecting women from evil spirits. Blue, the color of Shiva, meaning wisdom and heaven, is for the groom's shervani (elongated jacket) and churidar (trousers). Unexpectedly, The Wanted Brides rubric is located on the page with the prevailing blue color scheme, and the Wanted Grooms rubric is published on the red page. Thus, navigation in the two sections is based on the color opposition, which nonetheless can be confusing to the outsider.

The main graphic means of the newspaper page are font and illustrations.

Navigation on the page is designed through fonts. A larger size indicates information of greater importance. Typography features include fonts for the standard serif type, Garamond, 7 pt, in some cases even smaller. Advertisements that occupy the space of several modules use chopped fonts (without serifs), Arial, less often with serifs. At

first glance, the typographic selection features do not indicate any particular cultural coding; they only emphasize the social status of the advertiser. But this is exactly the commentary on the meaning of the font: the larger the font, the richer the author of the matrimonial advertisement. In India, status is directly related to social division and hierarchy in a society that has been formed over millennia.

As the size and space between the advertisements increases, so does the size of the advertisement (it can occupy up to several modules). The advertisements of the so-called 'elite' brides and grooms are separately scaled: a larger size, colored lettering for the font, absence of abbreviations in the text, and a thickened colored frame. Overall, in many advertisements design elements serve to emphasize the status of the family placing them; evoke awe and respect for its members. The price for placing one matrimonial advertisement is rather high which means that only middle-class and upper circles of Indians can afford them.

Lexical-semantic analysis of the matrimonial advertisements revealed almost the same sequence of words in the presentation of the person looking for a spouse and in the description of potential candidates within one announcement. This is due both to tradition (to indicate certain requirements for the bride or groom) and to the template in the dialog boxes on the site. Advertisements are placed online via the newspaper website by filling the data in the subcategories in the pop-up windows.

Since traditionally matrimonial advertisements are placed by parents, they present their child as an ideal candidate for marriage lending him or her with the most attractive features. They also wish them the best spouse. In depicting both parties, parents use vocabulary with positive connotations (*wonderful* boy/girl), euphemisms to put a veil on unpleasant circumstances (*without issues* -- without children), and abbreviated conventional terms (Rf - reputed family, own b'ss - own business, wkg - working, edu - educated, veg - vegetarian, qlfd - qualified, lkng4 - looking for, br - Brahmin, b'ful - beautiful, mglk - manglik). These lexical signs form a special ethnic matrimonial code requiring a clue for its deciphering.

According to the content of the announcements: the occupational, social background of the family / parents is indicated (*brother has a business in Canada, dad is very respected, parents work in the GVM government*); requirements to the appearance, social status and other peculiar features of the future spouse can be indicated (*bride must be at least 5 feet 4 inches, should not be from Poonia / Dehran, must be thin, preferably work in a bank, etc. be sure to send a horoscope from an educated status family, known throughout India*). Description of the spouse-seeker, as a rule, includes his/her education, appearance, height, weight, and district. It may concern physical



disabilities: *Boy uses new technology artificial prosthesis in right leg. However, boy is physically fit completely*). Parents refer to their children as boys / girls, even if they are in their 40s.

At the pragmatic level, according to Nazaykin's theory [22], an effective advertising message should be built according to the AIDCA formula, where A (attention) -- advertisements should attract attention; I (Interest) - advertisements should retain interest; D (desire) -- it should create a desire, C (confidence) -- it should earn trust and A (action) -- demand a consumer's action. This formula acts as a basis of the composition of the advertising text composed with linguistic and non-linguistic means. Its impact is on both the intellectual and emotional spheres.

This formula can be applied to Indian matrimonial advertisements with one remark. Respect is the foundation of the traditional Indian society. The image of parents, their child and perspective bride/groom in the advertisements in question should be constructed with the highest degree of respect.

The types of illustrations presented in the studied section are photographic and non-photographic. When ordering advertisements on the website, there is an option to place a photo of the bride/groom. However, they rarely appear. One reason for this may be a mixed attitude of society towards such announcements. Russian researchers D.A. Dronova and M.L. Butovskaya believe that such advertisements can be the last chance for some candidates due to their aggravated circumstances. Others believe that choosing a spouse via matrimonial announcement is not shameful. On the contrary, it is viewed as a real help in such a difficult task [14].

During the study, we asked local residents for comments. It is interesting that the very desire to study matrimonial discourse by a single young woman was embarrassing for male respondents. This is another proof of the fact that talking about marriage is intended primarily for parents, the elderly, and not for young people. We were told that even after marriage, young people should avoid publicly displaying their relationship. Marriage is a private matter. People should be humble in their feelings.

Thus, posting a photograph of the advertised bride or groom is more likely to be associated with moral restrictions than with the cost of the newspaper space.

Each section though (*Bride Wanted and Groom Wanted*) is headed by a photographic illustration of an unidentified groom and bride (correspondingly). They act as anchor objects on the page, attracting the attention of readers to the happy appearance of a young woman and man. The woman is dressed in a traditional Indian wedding gown. The man is dressed in a European fashion (tuxedo, bow-tie, white shirt). He is also wearing a yellow rose. There are no photos of couples.

In India, gender asymmetry is noticeable even at the level of newspaper advertisements. Where a man is allowed to have a Europeanized look, a woman remains traditionally dressed. According to our respondents, white dress for the bride is still uncommon, especially among women with low status. Most often, celebrities or very rich brides dare to wear white.

Rose in Indian culture is a special symbol. It was first mentioned in ancient Hindu tales, judging by which it was highly revered in ancient India. There was a law according to which everyone who brought a rose to the king could ask him to fulfill any of his wishes.

It was considered the flower of the keeper of the Vishnu Universe, so priests decorated the temples with roses, paved the way with petals during religious celebrations and festive processions. Roses were used as currency. It was believed that the contemplation of blooming roses cleanses the mind, heals the soul and brings it into harmony with the world.

Its smell was considered so pleasant that Indian princes and princesses filled grooves in their gardens with rose water along all their paths so that the evaporating smell of the roses could permeate their surroundings.

According to Indian legends, the most beautiful woman in the world, Lakshmi, was born from a blossoming rose flower composed of 108 large and 1.008 small petals. Vishnu, the guardian of the universe, having seen this charming beauty hiding in her lovely pink cradle, woke her with a kiss and, thus, turned her into his wife. From that moment, Lakshmi became the goddess of beauty and the rose that covered her became a symbol of divine mystery and was considered sacred among eastern nations. Yellow is a cleansing color. In India, a woman after childbirth should wear a yellow sari for a week.

Non-photographic illustrations are also rare. In one of the larger advertisements placed in the center of the page there is a colored illustration of Ganesha.

"Ganesha, Ganapati, in Hindu mythology, "the Lord of Ghana -- of the deities that follow Shiva... Revered as the god of wisdom and the eliminator of obstacles.... Ganesha is one of the most popular Indian gods; he is called for help in any matter of importance [23]. Due to its compositional location, this symbol extends its meaning from one announcement to the whole page.

Another hand-drawn illustration of the bride and groom in national wedding dresses depicts a groom with a wreath of marigolds. These orange flowers are used in India in almost all festivities. Near the temples one can see heaps of flowers, next to which women (representatives of the Mali caste) sit and collect them in endless garlands to

decorate the house, vehicle or jewelry. They are an obligatory attribute during weddings: the bride and groom exchange flowers, symbolizing rebirth and fidelity.

Communication with the audience through the design also occurs with the help of auxiliary graphic tools (lines, liners, markers, vignettes, spaces).

To highlight individual advertisements from hundreds of similar ones, some use liners with low saturation of red and its shades (magenta) and yellow or blue, dark and light blue (cyan). The choice of color for the liner is due to tradition. As you know, using at least one color can significantly increase the "pure effect" and double the number of responses.

Colored frames are presented in some advertisements as standard (1 pt) or decorative ornamental lines. Ornaments play a special role in the Indian design tradition. India is a country of diverse patterns and ornaments, a riot of colors and a variety of shapes. They can be ethnic, religious or floral; each with a symbolic meaning. According to one version, cucumber or paisley symbolizes the flame that embodies human life. Such a model means development, dynamism and energy. Nowadays, wedding dresses of Indian newlyweds often contain such motifs. The most popular floral motif is the image of a lotus, a flower revered and sacred to the people of India. It symbolizes creativity, wisdom and harmony. Indians sincerely believe in its magical power to fulfill cherished desires.

The oriental design of the studied advertisements contains floral vignettes to create frames or backgrounds. They are also used in subtitles that function as inconspicuous decorative elements.

## 6. Conclusion

Since their appearance, the Indian media have followed European printing trends and rules. However, they also introduce traditional elements into the design of matrimonial advertisements, which leads to a mixture of two design styles: universal (easily interpreted by a wide audience) and specifically Indian. This does not constitute a problem, because matrimonial advertisements are addressed only to in-group members. For them, the use of ethnic motifs in the verbal and non-verbal components of matrimonial advertisements will definitely be more appealing. The signs of the semiotic matrimonial code allow them to enter the general cultural communication space, even if they are geographically far from India. They will inspire confidence in verbal content, create a comfortable atmosphere for dealing with such a delicate topic and increase the chances of a successful result.

We believe that the pragmatic meaning of graphic design elements prevails over textual ones, since the reader makes a choice to read or skip text based on an assessment of its external design. All graphic elements, ornaments, lines, linings, vignettes, frames, etc., serve to create a respectful image of the person placing the advertisement, the person on whose behalf the advertisement is placed, and the potential bride/groom. Respect and traditions are key elements of Indian culture and are reflected in the space of newspaper communication.

Understanding the requirements for publication of matrimonial advertisements reflects the social structure and the specifics of interpersonal relations between men and women, parents and children. The interpretation of both visual and verbal signs by outsiders is largely dependent on his/her experience of Indian culture.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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